HISPANIC HERITAGE
ISSUE
TRAVEL

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One of the literal Knights of Columbus, Juan Ponce de León was a man orbiting the outer edge of history. He is currently believed to be the earliest known European to have made first contact with the mainland United States. Ponce was such a good soldier that he was appointed the first governor of Puerto Rico by the Spanish crown. So why would a man who had achieved the pinnacle of colonial success abandon his post and head into uncharted waters to follow a mythical Fountain of Youth?

It didn't happen voluntarily. A power struggle originating in the Spanish court displaced Ponce from the Puerto Rican governorship to the "flowery" place that he chanced upon and christened Florida.

Here's what happened. Ponce had been named governor of Puerto Rico after Diego Columbus, the eldest son of Christopher Columbus, was passed over for the position. He proceeded to colonize the island, with only a smattering of troops and a greyhound that terrorized the natives. Meanwhile, in Madrid, the slighted prodigal Diego was pursuing his birthright. He prevailed and Ponce was evicted from his post. It is under these circumstances that in March 1513 he pointed the good ship Santiago to the Sunshine State. There is a healthy debate as to whether Ponce was seeking an actual...
Fountain of Youth, which was rumored to be a magical river of juvenescence located in the Bahamas. On April 2, 1513, the Easter holy day *Pascua Florida*, he reached the east coast of Florida, somewhere south of present-day *St. Augustine*. Although there is no worshipful fountain of youth, travelers of the current era can find rejuvenation in the locales along Ponce's original route.

It's hard to get a sense of the ancient in the United States, but you can come closer in St. Augustine than anywhere else on the mainland. On August 28, 1565, Admiral Pedro Menéndez de Avilés founded the settlement, beating the English at Roanoke by 21 years. For about the next 200 years, Spanish settlers were constantly warding off roving bands of pirates, Brits and Indians. The Spanish fort of Castillo de San Marcos and its accompanying 25 acres is a gem for history hounds.

To the southwest, near the Florida Keys, lie the islands of the *Dry Tortugas*, named for their abundance of turtles and lack of fresh water. These little jewels lay a mere 70 miles west of Key West and provide a home for colorful birds and marine life. When Ponce sailed through the area, the seas were teeming with tortugas, which supplied the conquistadors with fresh meat. These seven islands, in reality a complex network of coral systems and sand surrounded by shoals, currently comprise the Dry Tortugas National Park. According the National Park Service website, this area is known for “its legends of pirates and sunken gold.” Fort Jefferson, one of the largest forts built by the U.S. government, is a popular landmark.

When they got as far as *Mound Key*, located on the southwestern coast of Florida, Ponce spotted a major Calusa settlement and realized that the tribe was warlike. To repair the travel-worn Santiago, they docked in nearby Estero Island—a poor choice, as the band barely escaped the hoards of Calusa that descended upon them. The Calusa are believed to have built the large system of shell, fish-bone and pottery ridges that dot the key and lend it its name. Though only accessible by boat, a visit to Mound Key is well worth the trip. It is thought to have been the major ceremonial center for the Calusa. If your goal is an archeological trip to expand the mind, then give Mound Key a shot.

Not far away at *Estero Bay Estuary*, the great explorer was fatally wounded by a poisoned Calusa arrow. It happened in 1521, during a mission to colonize Florida. The Estero Bay Aquatic Preserve, comprising the northern half of Estero Bay, became the state's first aquatic preserve in December 1966. The area is a botanist's delight, with forests of mangroves and prairies of seagrass underneath the shallows.

Though you won't find springs that take your years away along Ponce de León's route, you will find sights that may awaken the dreamer and explorer inside you.
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